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Lots of Monkey Business

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Rob Mounsey

lots of monkey business

Busy composer, arranger, producer, and session keyboardist Rob Mounsey '75 sees his work more as a career than a career.

A TINY ELEVATOR CHUGS UP EIGHT FLOORS to deliver you from the street into Rob Mounsey's Flying Monkey studio in Manhattan's Flatiron district. (The company's Flying Monkey moniker comes not from the airborne apes in the *Wizard of Oz*, but from Chinese mythology, according to the outfit's principal primate.) Here, surrounded by an array of digital and analog recorders, sound processing gear, samplers, and Mac-based editing equipment, Mounsey has worked on projects for Aretha Franklin, Carly Simon, Tony Bennett, Gloria Estefan, with producers Russ Titelman and Phil Ramone and others. This is where he produced his latest disc, *You Are Here*, his fifth as a leader and second outing with guitarist Steve Khan.

A wall of gold and platinum records testifies of Mounsey's successes elsewhere with artists like Paul Simon (*Graceland*), Natalie Cole (*Stardust*), Bill Joel (*The Bridge*), Steve Winwood (*Back in the High Life*), James Taylor (*Hourglass*), and Donald Fagen (*Nightfly*). Grammy nominations for various projects (including Local Color, his first duo effort with Khan) and an Emmy Award for composing theme music for the "Guiding Light" soap opera share a nearby shelf with a pile of ethnic instruments Mounsey has acquired over the years.

With characteristic wit, Mounsey says it is safe to say that he has worked on "less than 1000 albums but more than 12" during his 23 years as a top New York

session keyboardist, arranger, producer, and composer. While probably only a small number of record buyers know his name, the extent of Mounsey's monkey business is well known to the movers and shakers of the industry. Last year alone he was part of three Grammy-winning productions and was music director for the NARAS-sponsored MusiCares show.

Starting at age 11, Mounsey taught himself to read in all clefs by studying mini orchestral scores he inherited from his older sister. After poring over Mozart, Berlioz, and Beethoven, he became determined to write his own orchestral scores. "There was no one around to tell me that I couldn't, so I just started doing it," he says. By the time he was 17, a score he penned won him a BMI contest for young composers. He came to New York for the first time to receive the award at a reception attended by contemporary composers William Schuman, Norman Dello Joio, and George Crumb.

After high school, he turned his attention to jazz and came to Berklee. From there, he moved to New York to become a key player on numerous chart-topping recordings. Multifaceted talent, adaptability, and affability have kept Mounsey swinging among the branches of the taller trees in the music business jungle for over two decades. There is every indication that his brand of monkeyshines will continue to elicit squeals of delight for decades to come.

Q.

How did you end up coming to Berklee?

In high school, I had started to become interested in jazz and popular music and was losing interest in classical or serious music. I had heard about Berklee from some musician friends and wanted to go to school there.

My interest in jazz was growing. I liked the idea of improvisation or spontaneous composition and was also interested in jazz composition. That is kind of an arcane world, but it was so exciting to me. I was listening to music by Gil Evans, Stan Kenton, Tadd Dameron, Claire Fischer, and Duke Ellington. They were constantly stretching the idiom this way and that, exploring the European, African, and Latin musical heritage.

Q.

Were there any courses or teachers you had that were particularly influential?

The material Herb Pomeroy taught was very mind-expanding. There are many people who I remember almost daily for the things that I got from them. Phil Wilson is one of those. I used to play in his Dues Band. When I won Berklee's Richard Levy composition prize, I had to write a whole concert program that was played by the Dues band.

I had Gary Burton for a small band ensemble. He had very little to say, but it was extremely pithy, concentrated wisdom. He taught us how to play in a small group to make the whole sound better, not to make yourself sound better. That is something that I still try to do all of the time. I also loved analyzing Beethoven string quartets in John Bavicchi's classes. He got some young kids who were very green about that kind of music to really concentrate.

Q.

How did your career unfold after Berklee?

I took a semester off before graduating to go on the road with the Tommy Dorsey Band. After only two weeks, I gave my notice. I couldn't take it. Traveling on a bus doing one-nighters is a very young man's job. I was only 21, but I was already too old for it. The band was a bunch of kids in their twenties with a leader who was 75 and a few guys in their forties. The older players had been on that bus for 20 years. I knew I didn't want to do that, so I stayed around Boston playing gigs and doing copy work.

Ralph Graham, a singer I was working with, got signed to RCA in 1976. I became good friends with Leon Pendarvis who produced Ralph's album. I commuted down to New York to the old RCA studio on 44th Street that summer for the sessions. I played keyboards and ended up writing some string and horn arrangements too. Afterwards, Pendarvis told me he thought I should move to New York. He said he'd book me to play second keyboard on his dates, so I moved down in the fall on my 24th birthday.

Q.

How long was it before things started to open up for you?

Through Leon and a few other people I met, I started working quite a bit. I was lucky to get here at that time because there was a big boom happening in the record business. Everyone was making a disco record. We used to just crank them out. I have a few gold records from that era for working with Ashford and Simpson and the Michael Zager Band.

Back then, production teams were putting out an album each month. There was a large pool of players who always worked. There would be a lot of players in a room with a bunch of mikes. An arranger would come in and put out the parts and someone would turn on a tape machine. The recording business hadn't significantly changed in 30 years.

The scene that existed in the late '70s was all turned upside down by MIDI, drum machines, and sequencing by the mid '80s. Technology turned the whole business into something else. I am not saying that is all bad, but the work I do today is very different than what I did then. The scene is now completely fractured. You rarely work with a large group except for film work.

Q.

As a keyboard player, it must have been easier for you to join the technological revolution than it was for other instrumentalists.

It was. I didn't really want to get into electronic music originally, but it was unavoidable. My first synthesizer was an ARP 2600 with all those spaghetti patch cords. I'd bring it to the studio and people would say, "You know how to work that thing?" After a half-hour of fooling around with it I'd make it go "doink" and everyone would say, "Wow, did you hear that? It went 'doink'!"

Q.

Were you working mostly as a keyboardist on sessions when things started changing?

Primarily, but it was a hard adjustment as an arranger and producer too. There were some moments of serious vertigo. I produced three albums for Michael

Franks starting around 1982. The *Passion Fruit* album still stands up musically. We did that one the old way where we had a band for a week. I did simple overdubs on my Roland Jupiter 8 synthesizer and Michael sang. A lot of people liked that record. On the next two, we were struggling to incorporate all of the new electronic technology. We wanted to use the new tools, it was fun to make music with them, but there was a moment when we wondered where to start. It is a little easier now.

There are so many ways to build a recording. All of the technology is a big help but if you don't keep your ears and your tastes alive, it is easy to go seriously astray. You need to step back, see the big picture and take in the whole gestalt. You can get too obsessed with tiny details today because the technology allows you so much control.

I have always loved music, but I have especially loved recording. These days, you can play these crazy tricks on a recording. If I want to write a piece where all of a sudden 2,000 flutes start playing at the chorus, I can do that. You can create all of these illusions of things happening that didn't happen that way.

Q.

Can you give me an example of a project where you've done something illusory like that?

With Phil Ramone, I worked to create a recording of Tony Bennett and Billie Holiday singing a duet on "God Bless the Child." It came from an old film Billie had done with Count Basie and a septet—four rhythm section players and three horns. We took this noisy, low fidelity recording and got it to sound pretty clean with multifrequency noise gates. I took that and built a new click track all the way through, setting every click manually. I transcribed the whole arrangement exactly as originally played and then we played it along with the old track. The final tape had the old track, the new instrumental tracks, and Billie's vocals, which we could fade up or down. Then Tony added his vocals.

It is amazing that it really works. Unfortunately, I wasn't credited on the album. How would you describe a credit like that anyway?

Q.

How does your work go these days—how much arranging, how much playing, and how much producing do you do?

It is hard to say. I tell everyone that I don't have a career, I have a career. It all changes from week to week and year to year. Sometimes I may do a lot of TV commercials to pay the bills. I always get calls to write an arrangement or just to be a player—which is a lot of fun. Playing a session is pretty low-pressure compared to writing an arrangement and feeling the responsibility for how well a session turned out.

It had been quiet, but all of a sudden I started producing a lot of records at the end of last year. I did one with T. Monk and have another coming up with Bobby McFerrin. He wants to do another record with a choir. He improvised all of these pieces to multitrack tape and my job will be to organize them and arrange them for the choir. After he makes the record he wants to take the music around the country and perform it with college choirs.

I also recently released my own record *You Are Here* on Siam Records with Steve Khan. Siam has asked me to produce a CD by bassist Bakithi Kumalo. He is from South Africa and played on the *Graceland* album with Paul Simon. I expect I will end up cowriting some of the material and playing on it too.

I am also reaching out into the film music world again. I have worked on a few films, *Working Girl* with Mike Nichols and *Bright Lights Big City* with Donald Fagen. I did some episodic TV last year. The show, *Central Park West*, was terrible but it was a lot of fun.

Q.

When you are asked to write something like the great arrangements you did for Sinead O'Connor's *Am I Not Your Girl* CD, are you given parameters or can you just let your imagination go?

I am pretty free. That project was also produced by Phil Ramone. He has been a good friend and supporter over the years. We all met and talked about things and told them my ideas. We went over the road map of the song, how long it should be, and what lyrics Sinead was going to sing. We also made some minor changes

on the session. When a lot of nuances are written out for everybody, there is a limit to what you can change on the session. Sinead really wanted to make an old-fashioned sounding record with big band and, in some cases, strings.

Q.

It must have been a very different approach when you wrote charts for James Taylor or Donald Fagen.

Donald will usually have one really strong line that he knows he just has to have in the song. He will sing it to you. For other places he would tell me just to fill it in. It was really nice to get called for the latest James Taylor album because I love his music madly. Mike Brecker was on that session. James had asked him to improvise some lines and then harmonize them himself. Mike told James he should call me because I could do it faster. So I came in and sang James some lines and then harmonized them in two or three parts. Mike played all three lines on tenor sax. We called him “the three tenors.”

Q.

Do producers call you for a certain style or are you considered a general practitioner?

That is a good question and a big topic. When I was growing up, I always aspired to be a complete professional. Henry Mancini was my hero. Everyone would depend on him to deliver the greatest stuff and he always did it. He could write great songs, lead the orchestra, and write scores. Who else could write both “Moon River” and “Peter Gunn”?

It is funny, you can work so hard all of your life to try to get to that place, and one day, you look around and feel like you have arrived more or less. You really are a pro. Unfortunately, in the music business, you find yourself in situations where the aura of professionalism is almost a liability. It depends on whom you are with. That is incredibly unfair and a misunderstanding of what it is all about. That is how it is a lot of the time.

The etymology of the word “amateur” indicates that it is derived from the word “lover.” An amateur is someone who does something out of love. A professional is someone who can profess something; they have learned the discipline and now

they can teach it. I think we all have to struggle to be both things at once. We need all of the professional skills and still have the amateur spirit. Some people think that in a pro, the amateur spirit is dead and that you can't experience music holistically. They think if you know what you are doing, there is not enough street in your music and that you have no edge. I have seen some incredible mistakes because people thought they should hire someone who didn't know what he was doing and so the music would have that edge.

Unfortunately, some people feed that notion. They get caught in a certain spot—like finally being able to play 64 notes in every bar. Then they do it on everything.

Q. Is the music on your own records the style that is closest to your heart?

It is hard to say, there are so many things close to my heart and I haven't gotten to do them. I may not get to do them all. I have three or four other ideas for records. I would like to make a phantasmagorical album for surround sound. It would be a compositional recording created specifically with surround sound as part of the concept. I would also like to arrange a reunion of an old band I had called Joe Cool. It was a quartet with Jeff Miranov [guitar], Will Lee [bass], Christopher Parker [drums], and me. I'd love to do an album of retro sixties r&b with them—just for fun. I'd also like to investigate the African music scene in New York a little more. There are a lot of African and Brazilian musicians here.

Q. What was one of the most memorable sessions you have been on?

When I worked on Steely Dan's *Gaucho* album, I was just getting used to the idea of completely obsessive-compulsive studio guys making themselves crazy in pursuit of perfection. We were trying to do the title track. Most of it was written out by Donald. I was playing piano, Victor Feldman was playing electric piano, Steve Khan was playing guitar, Anthony Jackson was on bass, and Jeff Porcaro played drums. We worked on that one song for about 12 hours starting at noon. The track is complex and long—six or eight minutes. We had gotten four complete takes.

To all of the players, all four takes sounded perfect, none of us could hear anything wrong with any of them. Donald and Walter were sitting in the booth

looking like they had just tasted a rotten egg. They felt it wasn't really working. It was frustrating to us. All of the players loved Steely Dan's music so much. We were really happy to be on the record and were working very hard and being so patient. At midnight, Becker and Fagen said, "We're just not going to get this one, we're going to throw out the song." Then they split. The players were depressed because we hadn't made them happy. [Producer] Gary Katz stayed and Victor went back to his hotel. The engineer, Khan, Anthony, Porcaro, and I stayed from midnight until 4:00 a.m. We did seven more takes, and all seven sounded perfect to us. We were exhausted and went home.

Becker and Fagen came back in a few days later and listened to all of the takes. They called us to thank us for staying and doing all of the extra work and said, "I think there might be something here that we can use." They sat with Gary and started cutting the two-inch multitrack tape. According to Gary, there were at least a dozen edits between the various takes. Once they had done that and they had this two-inch analog tape with all the cuts, they erased everything but the drums! All of this was to get a drum performance that they really liked. Walter came in and replayed the bass part and I came back in and redid the acoustic and electric piano tracks. Steve Khan came in and redid the guitar tracks and they were on their way.

Q.

That sounds like such a painful way to make a record.

Very painful. After *Gaucho* and *Nightfly*, Donald took a long break. This process that was the only way he could satisfy himself, but it was so painful to go through that he couldn't stand it. Maybe there is something wrong with the picture when it gets to that point. I don't think it is supposed to hurt that much.

Q.

Do you have any thoughts for the young people wanting a career in the music business?

The best advice I can give is to keep the most open mind you can. You should realize when you go into this field that the music business is never going to make any sense. It is totally unpredictable and completely illogical. You have to be able to work well with a lot of different kinds of people. There are some brilliant ones

masters of music

and some that need a lot of hand holding because they don't know which end is up. Sometimes those who don't know what they are doing won't listen to you. There are others who are brilliant but really tough to work with. You just accept them because they are great and you know they have the stuff.

There are a lot of musicians who are really gifted though not educated who really have a lot that you can learn from them. They are going to be coming from a very different place than someone who studied at Berklee.

When I was younger, I had to learn to have respect for people who didn't have the education I had, but who genuinely had a lot to communicate. You can learn so much from people like that and if you have skills that they don't have, you can be a tremendous help to them. It doesn't necessarily matter that someone doesn't know how to read music or can't tell you what key his or her song is in. If they can do something beautiful that communicates with a lot of people, they have something for you to absorb.

Conversely, there are people who know all about scales and chords, but what they do does not communicate. That is missing the whole point. They might not be playing any wrong notes, but their music feels like a trigonometry textbook. If you are not communicating an emotion, the joy of making music, or the rhythmic excitement, what is the point? This is a good life lesson. It took me a while to learn it.

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